

Episode 313 - TD40 - Diagnosing When Words Are Empty Of Meaning

Post by "Cassius" of December 20, 2025 at 12:26 PM

Welcome to Episode 313 of Lucretius Today. This is a podcast dedicated to the poet Lucretius, who wrote "On The Nature of Things," the most complete presentation of Epicurean philosophy left to us from the ancient world. Each week we walk you through the Epicurean texts, and we discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. If you find the Epicurean worldview attractive, we invite you to join us in the study of Epicurus at EpicureanFriends.com, where we discuss this and all of our podcast episodes.

We are closing in on the end of those portions of Tusculan Disputations that are most relevant to Epicurean philosophy today, so we'll pick up this week at [Section 40 of Part 5](#).

Last week one of the points made last week was that while a lot of philosophy can be viewed by non-specialists as a word game, there are deep differences in the foundations of the different schools that lead to dramatically different conclusions about how to live. The words can begin to blur together, and the definition-games can become tedious, but it is extremely important to know what is behind the analysis of any viewpoint in order to judge the ultimate result.

This issue of whether virtue is the only good, or whether virtue is sufficient for happiness, has tremendous practical implications. Who or what gets to decide what "good" is? Who or what gets to decide what "virtue" is? Who or what gets to decide what "happiness" is? Behind the Stoic / Platonic / non-Epicurean viewpoint is this idea that there are supernatural gods, or supernatural ideal forms, to which we should look to tell us what to do rather than the sense of pleasure and pain which Nature gives to each of us individually. The choice of school you choose to follow is therefore going to have tremendous implications on your life individually, socially, religiously, politically, and in probably every way imaginable.

Let's also in this context go back and quote the way Cicero quotes Epicurus as to the sorites syllogism we used last night and the full context of it.

Cicero, Tusculan Disputations 3.41—42 (Usener 67, 69)

[Epicurus On The End] 'For my part I cannot conceive of anything as the good if I remove the pleasures perceived by means of taste and sex and listening to music, and the pleasant motions felt by the eyes through beautiful sights, or any other pleasures which some sensation generates in a man as a whole. Certainly it is impossible to say that mental delight is the only good. For a delighted mind, as I understand it, consists in the expectation of all the things I just

mentioned - to be of a nature able to acquire them without pain... ' A little later he adds: 'I have often asked men who were called wise what they could retain as the content of goods if they removed those things, unless they wanted to pour out empty words. I could learn nothing from them; and if they want to babble on about virtues and wisdoms, they will be speaking of nothing except the way in which those pleasures I mentioned are produced.' (Long & Sedley - Hellenistic Philosophers)

We might want to repeat the "color gradient chart" to illustrate this.

When you playing with these Platonists and Stoics you're playing word games in which the dice are loaded and the games are stacked against you as much as any casino in Los Vegas or Atlantic City.

At some point we need to compare this to Rand's (Aristotle's) A = A A think is itself.

And let's also cite what Joshua mentioned from Lorenzo Valla:

Post

[RE: Happy Twentieth of December 2025!](#)

Here is that passage from [Lorenzo Valla's *De Voluptate*](#):

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Joshua

December 20, 2025 at 8:31 PM

[media]<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/69222736/media>

Post by “Cassius” of December 25, 2025 at 4:23 PM

Early in this episode Joshua will remind us of the problems with "essentialism."

We had a brief thread on this in 2022 [here](#) but the part from that thread that sticks in my memory the most is the article by Richard Dawkins attacking it here

[Edge.org](https://www.edge.org)

Some of this article likely violates our "no-politics" rule, so be careful with it, but the article is so closely on point philosophically that it deserves citation.

Post by “Joshua” of December 25, 2025 at 5:58 PM

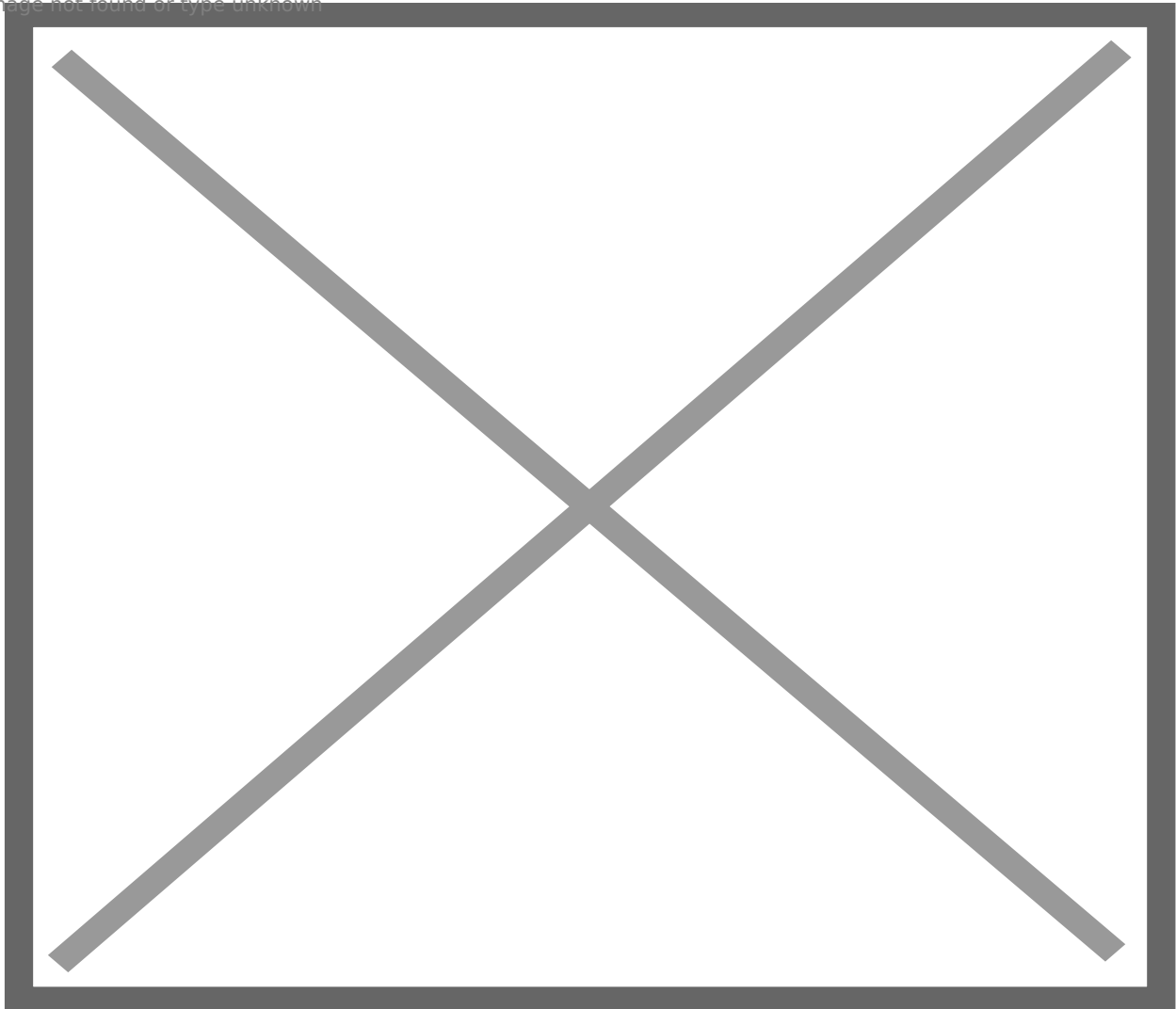
Quote

If you think, following the dictionary definition of essentialism, that the *essence* of rabbitness is "prior to" the *existence* of rabbits (whatever "prior to" might mean, and that's a nonsense in itself) evolution is not an idea that will spring readily to your mind, and you may resist when somebody else suggests it.

I don't remember if we discussed this on Sunday, but the question of whether essence is prior to existence or, to put it in Platonic terms, being is prior to becoming, is also related to Aristotle's teleology. Aristotle proposed that everything that begins to exist has four causes; the material cause describes the matter that makes up the thing, the efficient cause describes how it was made, the formal cause describes what shape it was made to take, and the final cause describes why it was made, or what purpose or telos it was made to serve.

With artificial objects it makes sense to speak of final causes, but Lucretius insists that such is not the case with natural objects like the eye. Book 4, line 823;

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Epicurus relies on a similar understanding of the relationship between existence and use in his Letter to Herodotus:

Quote

[64] Further, you must grasp that the soul possesses the chief cause of sensation: yet it could not have acquired sensation, unless it were in some way enclosed by the rest of the structure. **And [the body] in its turn having afforded the soul this cause of sensation acquires itself too a share in this contingent capacity from the soul.** Yet it does not acquire all the capacities which the soul possesses: and therefore when the soul is

released from the body, the body no longer has sensation. For it never possessed this power in itself, but used to afford opportunity for it to another existence, brought into being at the same time with itself: and this existence, owing to the power now consummated within itself as a result of motion, used spontaneously to produce for itself the capacity of sensation and then to communicate it to the body as well, in virtue of its contact and correspondence of movement, as I have already said.

Post by “Cassius” of December 25, 2025 at 7:51 PM

Yes I remember now thinking that the term "essentialism" probably applies more to Aristotle and "ideal forms" more to Plato. The concept appears almost the same with the main issue being "where" this metaphysical entity exists.

I suppose for the sake of exercise it would be good to try to state concisely what is Epicurus' answer to essentialism. No doubt the answer involves the way atoms move through void, but that's probably not complete without combining it with how those atoms interact with our senses, anticipations, and feelings. Without the full picture (and here I'm thinking about how Lucretius says that it's not by the rays of light themselves that we understand anything) I don't think we have a full picture of what it means to be "real" to us as humans.

Post by “Cassius” of December 27, 2025 at 3:52 PM

Episode 313 of the Lucretius Today Podcast is now available. This week our episode is entitled: "Diagnosing When Words Are Empty Of Meaning."

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